A STUDY OF JESUS FROM THE VIEW-POINT OF WIT AND HUMOR.

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I.

TO the supreme end of bearing witness to spiritual and moral truth Jesus was endowed with certain qualities. Among these were clear perceptions of right and wrong, poetic sensibility, insight and sympathetic imagination to enter readily into the consciousness of others,—their motives and reasoning, their hopes and fears, loves and hates, joys and sorrows. To the above-named qualities add a divine passion for service, a gift for oratory of a genuine and persuasive kind, and, withal, a faculty of wit and humor original and searching in marvellous degree. In making prominent this latter faculty, the writer here is concerned, not so much that he classify the wit and humor of Jesus, as that he give them a living relation to a personality ideal, and yet subject to the law of human development,—a personality whose speech to men gathers a somewhat sharper and sadder cast under the growing stress and strain of that conflict which finally exalted him to the agony of the cross. Hence the Christ who first appears in these pages is full of the buoyant hope and expectation of his earlier ministry; at which period, I fancy, the "inaudible laugh" more often dimpled the soul of him; more often the beam of sunny humor shot athwart his serious discourse. Thus it is I am pleased to see him when he painted such lively pictures as the following: The woman searching with candle and broom for the lost coin; and, like a woman, calling in all the neighbors to rejoice with her when she has found it.—The persistent man who wakes up his neighbor at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread, and, being refused, clamors at the door until from sheer weariness the neighbor rises, and hands out, or throws out, "as many as he needeth."

—The irrepressible widow pestering the unrighteous judge into granting her petition. "Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will do her justice, lest she wear me out by her continual coming." I suspect the phrase, "Though I fear not God, nor regard man," was aimed at a class of judicial magistrates of the day, more noted for scepticism and cynicism than for righteous judgment.—The unjust debtor who sues for mercy, and gets released from a debt of thousands of talents, then straightway casts into prison a poor man owing him but a few shillings.—The several parables about the bad stewards: The cunning and wasteful steward, who, anticipating his discharge, seeks to put his lord's debtors under obligation to himself by scaling down their debts.—The steward who gets drunk and beats the servants in his lord's absence, but is surprised in the midst of his folly by the latter's unexpected appearance on the scene. Further citations of this nature need not be made here.

In meeting criticism how charmingly he sometimes shuts off controversy by a little playful humor, it may be by a single epigram! When taken to task because his disciples do not fast, as is the custom of the Pharisees and the disciples of John, he opposes his questioners with none of the dialectic gravity of a Gautama Buddha; but, with good nature, he compares himself to a bridegroom and his wedding-friends. "Can the sons of the bride-chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast." According to all three of the synoptic gospels it is in this connexion that Jesus is censured for the very opposite of fasting, viz., for feasting and fellowship with "publicans and sinners." And how does he meet the censure? By a reply memorable to all succeeding generations for the deep, sympathetic wit and wisdom of it: "They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Having come repeatedly in contact with this fault-finding temper, directed sometimes against John the Baptist, sometimes against himself, he sets it forth in this happy comparison: "But whereunto shall I liken the men of this generation? They are like unto children that sit in market-places, and call one to another, saying, 'We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not mourn.' For John is come neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of Man is come eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a gluttonous man and a

wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children." This carping generation is whimsical and petulant as a lot of children playing at mock weddings and funerals. It is predisposed to set its face against the new dispensation, whether it appear in the form of John's austere asceticism, or in the broader and more cheerful comradeship of Jesus.

In the graphic irony of the parable of the Supper and Invited Guests, whereby he sets forth the rejection of his messianic mission by his own countrymen, and the substitution instead of the heathen element,—in this we meet again with a soul of genial humor. We may fancy a gracious smile rippling his face when he enumerated the various excuses offered for declining the invitation of the host, especially that of the man who said, "I have married a wife. Of course I cannot come."

The traditional habit of viewing Jesus as only disposed to grave discourse has invested some of his utterances with a significance altogether different from what they have when the fine flavor of the speaker's humor is tasted in them. A curious instance of this is the account given in the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, which describes the peculiar treatment of the Canaanitish woman pleading for the healing of her daughter. When the disciples try to keep her away she cries the more, "Lord, help me." And what reply does she get? Surely, one neither consistent nor pleasant to hear from the lips of the Messiah of all nations, if we construe it with literal seriousness.—"I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to the dogs." Likely enough these words were given the interrogatory form: "Is it not that I was sent," etc., etc. Howbeit, the very witty reply comes, "Yea, Lord, for even the dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their master's table." According to the text in Mark, Jesus so far relished the woman's wit that he healed her daughter because of it.—"For this saying go thy way," etc. It may be the reply ascribed to the woman was uttered by Jesus himself, in response to objections made by his disciples to the extension of his mission of fellowship and good-samaritanship to the heathen.

II.

With what spontaneity of wit this knight of spiritual things meets and masters varied objections and opposing elements that rise unbidden in his way! His answers often come as a searchlight unexpectedly turned on obscure objects in the darkness.

They surprise the hearer from a new point of view with apt quotation, startling paradox, or vivid parable, minted as fresh coin in his own brain. Striking proof he shows of wit and insight into human nature when early in his ministry he returns home to preach in the synagogue of his native village. His former townsmen "wondered at the words of grace which proceeded out of his mouth." But (yes but)—"Is not this the carpenter's son, and his mother and brothers and sisters—are they not all with us?" Some were offended at his manifest superiority to their standard of mediocrity. Offended also was the young evangelist; in the consciousness of his spiritual authority offended. "Doubtless ye will say unto me, physician heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done at Capernaum, do also here in thine own country. But of a truth, I say unto you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when there came a great famine over all the land; and unto none of them was Elijah sent, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Zidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman, the Syrian." This just, as well as clever, application of what his hearers accepted as historical facts he clinches with that oft-quoted saying, "Verily, a prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, among his own kin, and in his own house."

Does not Jesus evince on divers occasions a marked phase of wit in the very ready and unique fashion in which he probes to the bottom human prejudice and selfishness by unexpectedly setting up a standard of life contrary to the conventional one—sometimes contrary to the all but universal practices of men? To cite only an instance here, take his treatment of the foolish question as to who of his disciples should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Could any response have been more surprising than the act of set ting a child in their midst, with the remark, "Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye can in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven."

How many of the shorter sayings of the Man of Galilee have gone into the world's permanent circulation of wit and humor! Urging the simple fishermen to be apostles of his truth, wittily he observes, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Delegating his disciples for missionary work, he admonishes them, "Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, be ye, therefore, wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall

they call them of his household." "A man's foes shall be they of his own household." Certain people protesting, that they will follow him whithersoever he goes, he facetiously, yet with a touch of sadness, declares, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." However, taking them at their word, he summons them forthwith to surrender to the new movement for righteousness sake. Ah, but they excuse themselves, both on account of the living and the dead. Then come from him the pregnant replies: "Let the dead bury their dead." "No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking backward is fit for the kingdom of God.' When he perceives that the multitude are prompted to follow him by motives belonging to the animal rather than the spiritual man he turns on them with the just rebuke, "Ye seek me not because ye saw signs [of power to satisfy spiritual hunger]; but because ye ate of the loaves, and were filled." Hence the frequent sarcasm, "They seek after the loaves and fishes." His countrymen boast of having Abraham for their father; and sharply he exposes the chasm between their professions and practices, "If ye were Abraham's children ye would do the works of Abraham." He is warned against the danger of unpopularity: he warns against the danger of popularity. "Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you! For in the same manner did their fathers to the false prophets."

III.

Inasmuch as the law and the prophets were so generally held to be "the seat of authority" in religion and morals, it is very interesting to note how Jesus deals with opposition by pat quotations from these sources. Sometimes the quotations are applied to himself, sometimes to the age in which he lives, sometimes to certain classes of his countrymen. Thus, recognising on the part of some a wilful blindness, he makes them fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah:

"By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand,
And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:
For this people's heart is waxed gross,
And their eyes they have closed;
Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes,
And hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart,
And should turn again,
And I should heal them."

When the Orthodox leaders came with carping questions and accusations Jesus readily turned against them their own scripture; not that the word was authority with him above the expansive soul of man, but that they, at least in theory, had so made it themselves. If they complain that he, or his disciples, transgress the law, or some tradition of the elders, straightway come citations to show them the real offenders in much weightier matters:—"Ye make void the word of God itself because of your tradition." "Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you doeth it?" "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you,

> This people honoreth me with their lips:
> But their heart is far from me
> But in vain do they worship me,
> Teaching as their doctrines the percepts of men."

The Pharisees undertake to trip him on the subject of divorce. —"Is it lawful for man to put away his wife for every cause?" He answers by referring to the Pentateuch.—"Have ye not read, that he which made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the twain shall become one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." To this the questioners not inaptly rejoin, "Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorcement, and to put her away?" They seem to have drawn him into an inconsistency; but how sagaciously he turns the edge of the second question,— "Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives." To paraphrase it, Moses was constrained to adjust his laws to the development of his people . . . Not his laxity, but the laxity of your fathers made the laxity of the law.

Some of the wisest and wittiest rejoinders concern the observance of the Sabbath. The orthodox charging that his disciples had profaned that day by plucking ears of corn, he confutes them with a precedent made by their most venerated king, and by the priests themselves. "Have ye not read what David did when he was hungered? How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shew-bread, which it was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them that were with him, but only for the priests, etc. etc." They complain of his healing on the Sabbath; and he reminds them that to keep the law of Moses, they inflict on the little child the barbarous rite of circumcision on the Sabbath; "and shall I not make the sick every whit whole? Judge not according to appearance,

but judge righteous judgment." "You hypocrites, does not each one of you loose his ox or ass from the crib, and water him on the Sabbath day? And shall not this daughter of Abraham be loosed (from her infirmity) on the Sabbath?" Again, "If you had an ox or a sheep fall into a pit on the Sabbath, would you not straightway draw him out? How much then is a man of more value than a sheep!" "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm, to save life or destroy it?" Talk of profaning the temple,—"One greater than the temple is here." "For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath." Or still stronger, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." How all merely conventional and traditional objections melt away before the logical wit of such "inspired common sense"!

In the matter of healing diseases, the Pharisees antagonised the Nazarene, not so much because of their stricter Sabbatarianism, as because envious of his greater success in the exercise of a power they claimed themselves. Faring so ill in their charge of Sabbath-breaking, they fell into the still more unfortunate charge: "This man doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub, the prince of devils." For them unfortunate indeed; for with what nimble wit the young preacher forges the following boomerang from their logic!—"Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation. And a house divided against itself shall not stand: and if Satan casteth out Satan he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? And if by Beelzebub I cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore shall they be your judges. But if I by the spirit of God cast out devils, then is the kingdom of God come upon you., etc., etc."

The chief priests and elders were all the more envious of the growing influence of the teacher from Galilee, because he held no commission from any divinity school, or ecclesiastical body. Hence they came at him with the impertinent question, "By what authority doest thou these things?" It was an offence to the just pride of self-respect, for which he quickly confounded them by one of the most embarrassing of dilemmas.—"I will ask of you one question, which if you answer me I will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men? answer me." "And they reasoned with themselves, If we shall say from heaven, he will say, Why then did ye not believe him? But if we say from men, we fear the multitude: for all hold John as a prophet." The only refuge left was (for them especially) the humiliating confession, "We know not."

IV.

It became more and more evident, that the standard of truth and life set up by the Man of Galilee was irreconcilable with the standard maintained by the conservative, both in religion and politics. His enemies multiplied, not solely because of his religious protestantism, but in measure because there was in his teachings a spirit of protest against certain unjust economic and social relations existing among his countrymen. As the "irrepressible conflict" grows more irrepressible, they seek in more deliberate ways to entrap him. Sadducees, Herodians, Scribes and Pharisees, all have their unsuccessful bouts with him. To put him into bad odor either with the Romans, or his own countrymen, the Pharisees connived even with their hated enemies, the Herodians. Joining with them, they once opened on him with this insulting flattery:—"Master, we know that thou art true, and carest not for any one: for thou regardest not the person of man, but of a truth teachest the way of God. Tell us, therefore, is it lawful to give tribute unto Cæsar or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?" A most cunningly framed question this: for to answer yes, was to deeply offend the national prejudices of his people, and destroy his influence with them as a prophet. To answer no, was, on the other hand, to risk apprehension by the Roman government for political treason. Realising their craft, Jesus turns on them sharply:—"Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Bring me the tribute money. Whose is this image and superscription?" "Cæsar's," they reply. Then—perhaps a momentary flash of scorn in the eye—the words burst forth with weighty emphasis, "Render, therefore, unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's." Pausing, and rising above scorn to a sublime consciousness of the debtor relation of all men to one Father, he adds "and unto God the things that are God's."

But of all the victories of Jesus over those who endeavored to ensnare him none is quite so dramatic and impressive as that recorded in the first eleven verses of the eighth chapter of John. Touching the sin of the adulterous woman the Roman law was more lenient, and more in general favor with the Jews themselves, than the Mosaic. In application the Rabbis had modified the rigor of the latter; and the teachings of Jesus were distinctly of a milder cast. When, therefore, the Pharisees and Scribes reminded him that the law of Moses required that an adulteress should be stoned to death, and sprung the question, "What, then, sayest thou of her?" the intent was to hedge him about in a double dilemma.

They hoped, as in putting the question of the tribute money, he would side either for the Mosaic law or the Roman law, or would raise an issue between the strict and lax constructionists. Pronouncing for the former he would go counter to the inclinations of the people in general, and be charged with contradicting himself as the teacher of a more humane doctrine. Pronouncing for the latter, he would offend what may be called the Puritan element among the Jews; the charge then would be, thou hast contradicted the Scripture, and gone against Moses himself. In case, however, he avoided these issues, there yet remained the expectation that he would lay down, on his own authority, a new rule of practice, and so appear to be setting himself above *all* the recognised authorities —the Roman law, the Mosaic law, and the rulings of the Rabbis. Surely, they thought, he will answer so as to bring himself into disrepute with some important class of his countrymen. In such a complicated dilemma as this, it is quite rational to suppose that even the swift intellect of Jesus required a moment or so to consider how he should deal with such crafty questioners. He stooped down, and marked on the earth, while he framed a reply the wisest and wittiest possible to the situation. Right marvellous encounter this, between the sons of darkness and the son of light! Round about stand the people, wondering what he will say. Within the circle, nearer the Master, wait his disciples in breathless anxiety, both hopeful and fearful of the result. In the centre stands the woman, scarlet-faced in her shame, guilty of the charge against her, no doubt as to that. Close upon Jesus, eyes involuntarily gleaming hatred, faces advertising exultant expectation of victory this time— close upon him, in his supposed confusion, his adversaries press their cunning question: "What sayest thou?" They have had full opportunity to be secretly exultant. Then slowly he raises himself, and with all commanding gravity and insight into the infirmity of man in general, perhaps these men in particular, he answers: "He that is without sin among *you*, let *him* first cast a stone at *her*." The sensitive, sympathetic Christ feels the pain of the questioners' own confusion. Magnanimously he spares them further embarrassment: stooping again, he marks on the ground while they have time to slink away. The accusers themselves convicted, how now shall he deal with the accused? Magnanimous again, Jesus condemns not; but with a bearing toward her, with a tone of voice, with words full of sad and gracious rebuke, the most effectual to insure reform, he gravely charges her,—"Go thy way: from henceforth sin no more."

Notwithstanding the rejection of this anecdote as spurious by a considerable number of Biblical scholars, I unhesitatingly accept it as the record of an actual fact in the life of the same capacious and compassionate soul who said to the repentant Magdalen, in the house of Simon:—"Thy sins, which are many, are forgiven thee.' Subjectively considered, no account of the Nazarene's trials of wit bears any more genuine stamp than this story of the adulterous woman.

V.

Under stress of disappointment at the apparently small results of his labors and sacrifices; under stress of increasing antagonism to his way of life, both among the upper and lower classes, the preaching of Jesus becomes more aggressive and pungent in its wit and humor. "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you." For the self-complacent and uncharitable hypocrite he has a quiver full of "sun-arrows."—"Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, and considereth not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother's eye." Be not as the hypocrites who pray, and fast and give alms "to be seen of men." Calling the Pharisees "blind guides," he asks, "Can the blind guide the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?" Again he says, "Beware of false prophets, which come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"

Jesus' dislike of sectarian pride and self-righteousness seems to reach a climax of expression in the piercing ridicule of the familiar parable of the Publican and the Pharisee who went up into the temple to pray. How incomparable the clear, picturesque antithesis made between the two opposite and generic types of character therein set forth!

Jesus had experienced in the smaller cities enough of hypocrisy, craft, and resisting sensualism to call out his powers of irony, of ridicule, and of invective too. But it was within the walls of the sacred City of Jewdom, that he was pricked to the utterance of those most caustic parables and denunciations which precipitated the final catastrophe. Among the former which gave special offence is the following very remarkable one of the Husbandmen and the Vineyard:—"There was a man that was a householder, which planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a wine-

press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into another country. And when the harvest drew near, he sent a servant to the husbandmen to receive his fruits. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty. And he sent another servant, and him also they shamefully maltreated, and turned away empty. And still he sent a third, and him they killed. Likewise did they unto other servants, beating one, stoning another, and killing yet another. Finally the lord of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my son: It may be they will reverence him. But the husbandmen, when they saw the son, said among themselves, This is the heir; come let us kill him, and have the inheritance ourselves. And they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him." Pausing here for his words to take effect, the parabolist continues,—"What, therefore, will the lord of the vineyard do unto them? He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and let out the vineyard unto other husbandmen, who shall render him the fruits in their season." Following close upon the parable, Jesus happily applies to himself these lines from the Psalms:

> "The stone which the builders rejected,
> The same was made the head of the corner:
> This was from the Lord,
> And it is marvellous in our eyes."

To the prophet from Galilee, each day at Jerusalem makes more evident the hardened cynicism of the aristocratic Sadducees, the self-complacent hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and in general the oppressions of the poor and weak by the rich and strong. Religion itself seems harnessed to the golden chariot of commercial lust. The vast heart of the Son of Man quivers more and more with the wrongs of the common people as *his* wrongs, until there comes an occasion when the swelling "anger of love" discharges itself in that vehement invective which reaches its powerful climax in these words: "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye build the sepulchres to the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets, wherefore ye witness to yourselves that ye are the sons of them that slew the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers." Such impassioned denunciation from the prince of peace and good-will—does it not exalt the meaning of Shakespear's lines:

> "Great affections wrestling in thy bosom,
> Doth make an earthquake of nobility?"

I take the woes in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, and eleventh chapter of Luke, as in the main genuine, whatever may have been the occasion and order of delivery. Presented in Matthew as part of the last public discourse of this compassionate and dauntless friend of "the weary and heavy laden," they naturally come at the end of the conflict in which "the logic of events pushed him on to act more the part of aggressive reformer, with his love-angers and "heroic angers," than was the case when he set out on his divine mission, all-radiant with the hope of converting his countrymen, all-boundless in charity and faith. Moreover, let the plain word be spoken, that this God-like man had some sublimer business—business more serviceable withal—than that of mere saint, teaching non-resistance and the amiabilities of life.

VI.

Under a free and elastic interpretation of terms, many more illustrations might be furnished of Jesus' wit and humor. Thus, in the parable of the Good Samaritan we can hardly fail to taste the flavor of subtle irony in the personalised contrast drawn between his own sentiment of universal brotherhood, and the provincial, sectarian prejudice dominating his captious questioner, and the church of which he was a member. That other greatest of the parables, the Prodigal Son, has also its undercurrent of humor, similar to that met with a number of times in Jesus' teachings. It embodies one more of the vivid antitheses he drew between the typical "frozen Pharisee," fast-morticed in conventional religion and morality, self-complacent, unpoetic, unsympathetic—between him and the impulsive, passionate wanderer from God, who after a season returns through the saving repentance of sin.

Looked at from the view-point of humor, several of the parables cast by "higher critics" into the category of the spurious, or doubtful, may be brought back into the list of genuine. For instance, in the so-called parable of the Last Judgment, I find more humor than theology. May it not be classed with the Saint-Peter-at-the-Gate parables of the present age, in which the gates of the heavenly city are made to swing open with due alacrity for the unpretentious doer of righteousness, but remain closed to the professional pietist and dogmatist?

But why adduce further evidence of Jesus' wit and humor? Every reading of the gospel records makes more manifest his exercise of these qualities in one or another form. Now he lights up his grave discourse with a bit of pleasantry, like a beam of sun-

shine. Now he excites his hearers to new and unconventional reasoning by startling paradoxes, or unexpected questions and answers. Now he confounds captious critics with the wittiest logic, or shuts off all controversy with a single retort that goes straight to the heart of the matter. Yet again he lays bare shams and shammers with ridicule—aye, on occasion, with invective, sharp and sure of aim. Pleasantry, repartee, ridicule, irony, invective—all are sanctified in his master motive of serving the eternal verities, and advancing the kingdom of heaven on earth. O Son of Man and Prophet of God! O marvellous revealer of truth and unveracity, marvellous saint and reformer, lover and heroic smiter, Supreme of the Sacrificers—what the reverent Tennyson said, I may say as well:

"Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest art thou."